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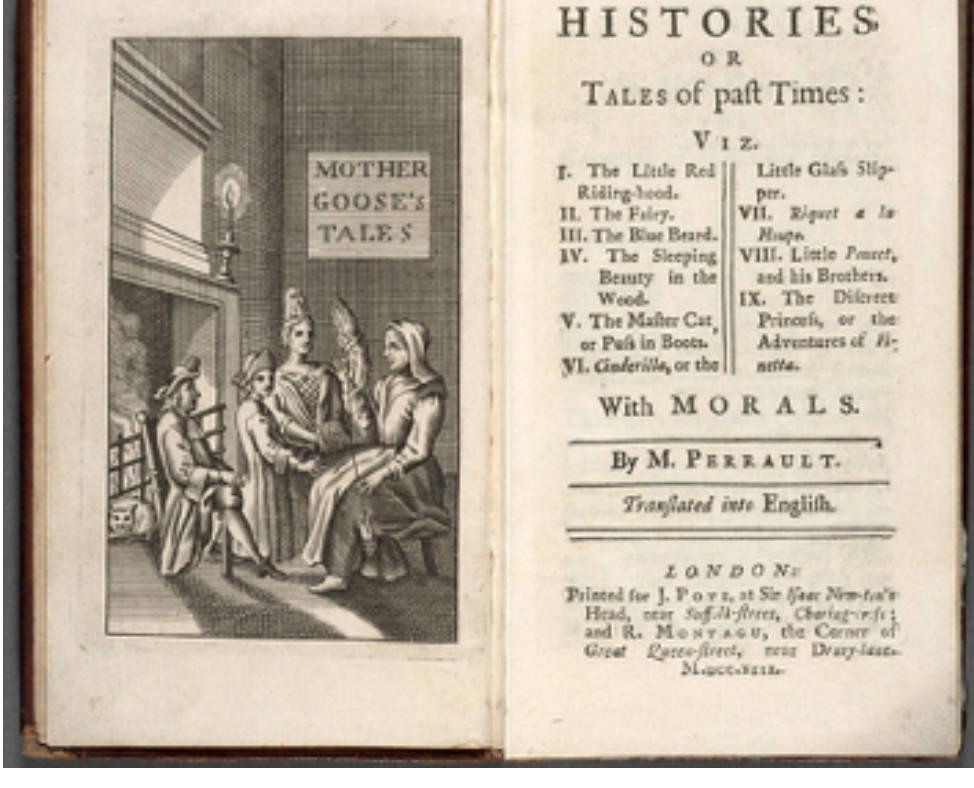
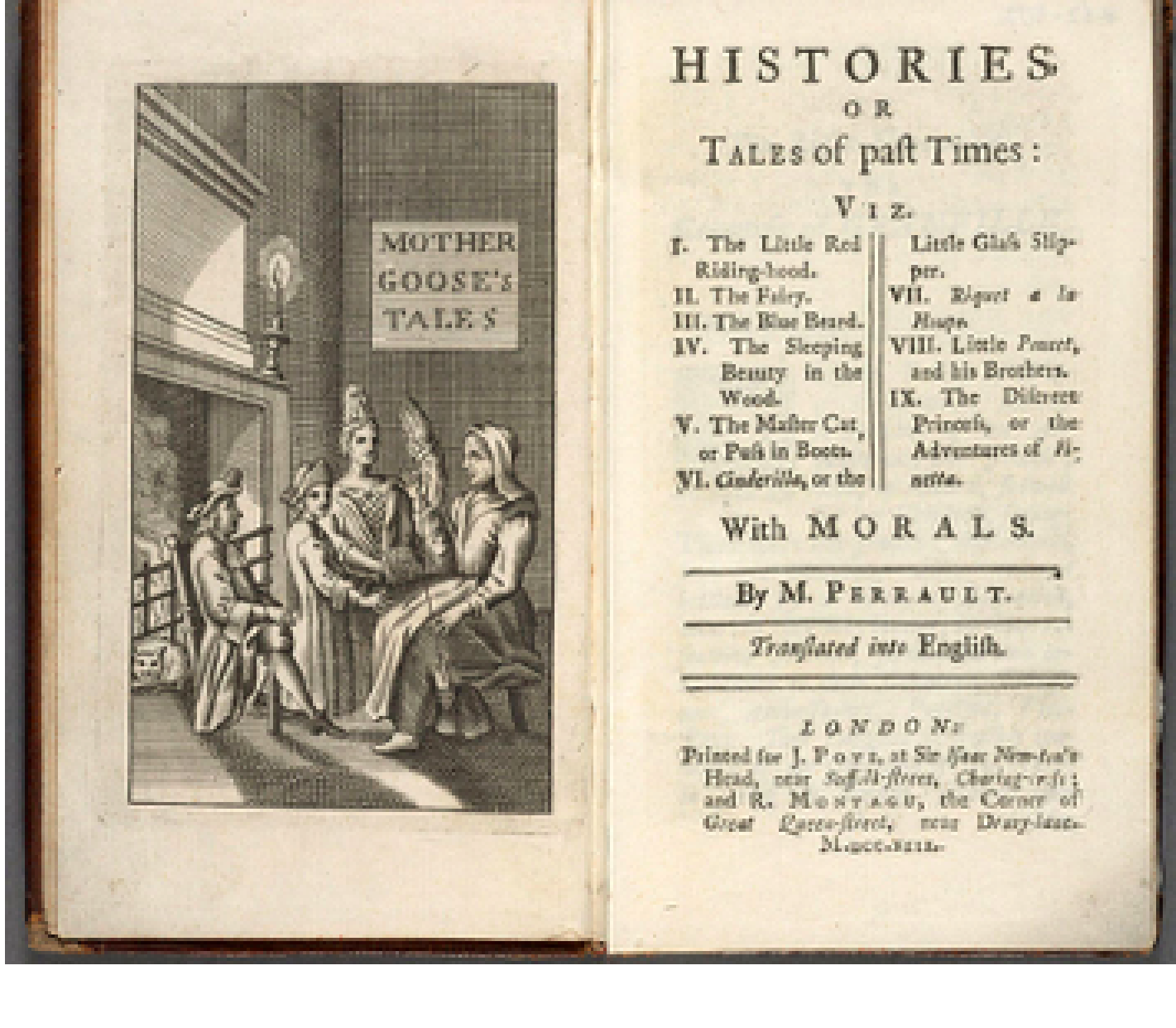
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# Feminist Fairies and Hidden Agendas: The Birth of the French Fairy Tale

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Frontispiece from the 1697 edition of Charles Perrault's Tales of Mother Goose (from Houghton Library)

By Elizabeth Winter (Guest Contributor)

Today when we think of fairy tales or French *contes de fées*, we think of Disney princesses, fairies and heroes fighting dragons, with a happy ending and a moral about the power of perseverance or kindness. The origins of the modern fairy tale do not fit so nicely into this modern conception, however. When fairy tales emerged for the first time as a cohesive printed genre in 17<sup>th</sup> century France, they took on a rather satirical and subversive tone.

Since its beginnings, the fairy tale has been a fluid, almost ephemeral category. Though existing earlier in oral form, the term *contes de fées* or “tales about fairies” was coined by Countess Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy in 1697, when she published her first collection of tales. Though Charles Perrault’s 1697 *Tales of Mother Goose* remains one of the best-known works of French fairy tales, women like d’Aulnoy actually dominated and developed the genre.



Portrait of Mme d'Aulnoy

Nurtured by d’Aulnoy and her aristocratic contemporaries like Henriette-Julie de Murat and Marie-Jeanne l’Héritier, fairy tales blossomed in literary salons. They were written by women, for women. Though they lacked political or social influence in the period, female authors still produced two thirds of the fairy tales written between 1690 and 1715.

Soon, the term “fairy tale” became a declaration of resistance against the 17<sup>th</sup> century literary and social status quo. D’Aulnoy’s term signaled the arrival of a genre dominated by women, both in terms of its female authors and the powerful goddess-like characters they created.

How did largely disenfranchised women develop such a powerful genre and literary influence in this constricting period? One explanation is that early fairy tales were passed orally through families and were therefore widely accessible to individuals across gender and class. Even with less education than their male counterparts, women would have had equal knowledge of this common mythology. Women may even have had *greater* access to these stories, as females were typically associated with storytelling, likely because of their domestic and child-rearing duties allowing them to harness the tales and put them into print.



Illustration for Mme d'Aulnoy's "La Chatte Blanche"

The imaginary and supernatural focus of the genre itself also provided women the opportunity to separate from the conditions of their everyday life. In the tales they could claim greater power and agency for themselves and their female characters. In magical fairy realms women, like the wealthy and powerful white cat-woman in d’Aulnoy’s *La Chatte Blanche* or Princess Felicity who rules an island that is impervious to man’s control in “*L’île de la Félicité*,” could at last hold social and political power.

Unlike everyday life, the realms of fairy tales were not regulated by France’s Catholic religion, Louis XIV’s monarchy or strict social expectations. In fact, the tales often undermined and offered veiled critiques of these institutions, depicting the royal court and the church as either too extravagant or impotent. The utopias the authors or *conteuses* created were simultaneously defiant of the contemporary social conditions, while seemingly innocuous (and able to go unpunished) because they seemed mere fancy.

Most powerfully, the fairy tales reveal the desire of 17<sup>th</sup> century women to alter their circumstances and express themselves. Just as the fairies in their tales possess powers to determine human fate and uphold a moral code, the *conteuses* used their tales to begin to guide others towards a more ideal society in which women could possess influence and agency.

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